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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the importance of librarians with the current availability of online information. The first section summarizes the author's observations of online research in special libraries in the 1980s. The second section presents his observations of the current situation, using examples from the Los Angeles Times Editorial Library, including the Library's intranet, which offers over 1,000 Internet links organized into subject categories, fee-based resources, and customized databases is described, as well as classes and "brown bag" lunch sessions providing training on using these resources to staff. The third section discusses 4 issues that were present in the 1980s and continue to limit end-users from doing their own research: time, money, technical capabilities, and searching skill. (MES)

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In a Do-it-Yourself World, Who Needs Librarians?

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Los Angeles Times Editorial Library

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My first glimpse into the world of online research came in 1983, when I was a fresh-out-of-college intern working in the public affairs department of a major corporation. In those technologically primitive days, the handful of computers in the department used ungainly 8-inch floppy disks – hard drives were unheard of – and the whole department shared one noisy dot matrix printer. People received and sent mail, not email, and read the newspaper on their desks, not online.

But in one room there was a hint of something bigger: a dedicated Lexis/Nexis terminal. This was not just a computer, this was a piece of furniture — it was big and wide and could be used only for searching Lexis and Nexis. It had brightly colored buttons with odd code words like "KWIC" and "Mail-It."

It was mysterious, fascinating and a little bit scary, especially when we were told that using it cost something like $180 an hour, a particularly frightening figure for an intern earning just $7 an hour. I didn't touch it, and for the most part it sat unused. But there was one woman there who was not intimidated. She used the machine with confidence and skill, seemingly pulling documents from it with ease. She had been trained as a librarian.

By 1987, I was in library school, online databases were proliferating, and the debate over end-user access to these resources was underway. A PC Week article that year reported, "In most corporations, and especially among Fortune 500 firms, on-line searching is performed almost exclusively by librarians. But this trend is gradually changing. Corporations are beginning to realize that certain professionals need direct access to information at a moment's notice."

Was the special librarian's role as an online searching intermediary endangered? No. Articles from that period identified four factors limiting the number of end-users doing their own searching: cost, search expertise, the technical requirements of searching, and time limitations. In other words, online searching was expensive, it often involved the use of arcane codes and abbreviations, it required a properly configured computer and modem, and it could be a big waste of time if you didn't know what you were doing.

I saw these principles in action at the San Francisco Chronicle library, where I worked after library school. There, the entire newsroom was welcome to use the newspaper's in-house electronic archive of stories. But most did not, instead calling on the library to search and retrieve. For the most part, the library users were thrilled with the speed with which we could retrieve articles from our own in-house database. An occasional article from Nexis, Datatimes, or Vu/Text was considered a terrific bonus.

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Special librarians controlled the keys to the online research kingdom. In a 1989 article in Online, Donna Cornick dismissed fears that the librarian's role in online searching was doomed. "The intermediary will survive. Even in the face of the growing popularity of searching databases on compact disks or do-it-yourself online searching, the intermediary will continue to provide an important and necessary service."

Today

OK, enough with the trip down memory lane. Things have changed.

The Internet has given the world numerous easy-to-use and inexpensive research tools. Many library users are getting direct access to commercial databases such as Nexis and Dow Jones, which have redesigned their search interfaces to appeal to novice users. Online research is cheaper, easier, and less technically demanding than ever before. Even many venerable reference books have been supplanted by websites.

So, once again, we have to wonder: Who needs librarians?

Today I work at the Los Angeles Times Editorial Library. The Times library, like many special libraries, is undergoing a gradual shift in character to adapt to this new do-it-yourself world. The Times library employs 30 people, including 12 reference librarians, in Los Angeles, Orange County, Calif., and Washington D.C. The reference librarians serve the editors, writers and photographers of the Times, a potential user base of about 1,000 people.

Do-it-yourself online research is not a new concept for newsroom employees of the Times. Since 1992, staffers have been able to search TimesOnline, the papers' text archive, using a command line interface (a web browser interface was introduced in 2000). In 1997, the library rolled-out the web version of Mediasphere, an in-house database for photographs and other graphical images. Both TimesOnline and Mediasphere allow library users to get what they need without the assistance of librarians.

The Internet, meanwhile, has emerged as a viable and heavily used source of information for many reporters and editors. Times staffers have been connected to the Internet since 1994, when the library introduced a text-based intranet using the Lynx browser. Today, use of the Internet in the newsroom ranges widely – some tech-savvy people use sophisticated searches and download vast collections of data; others remain hesitant to attempt even the simplest function.

A significant change occurred in November 2001 when the Times library provided access to Dow Jones Interactive to all newsroom employees, allowing them to search the thousands of publications offered on that service. A total of 524 employees had signed up to use the service by March 2002. One month's statistics found 210 people actually using their accounts.

Rather than resent the shift in online research to the end-user, the Times library has embraced it as an opportunity to grow. The library's intranet – the home page for newsroom users – offers over 1,000 Internet links organized into subject categories, as well as fee-based

resources and customized databases developed by librarians. The library's CD-ROM server, accessible through the intranet, allows reporters and editors to remotely access Census information, public records, phone directories, and business records.

Resources available on the intranet include:

- Searchable databases of information gathered by Times reporters and librarians about the Sept. 11 terrorists, victims, and suspects, plus related chronologies and lists.
- Voter registration records of Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Santa Barbara, San Diego and San Bernardino counties.
- Campaign contributions for local, California and federal races, plus those from George W. Bush's 1994 and 1998 Texas gubernatorial campaigns.
- A special Census database that pulls together 2000 data, breaks down the complicated race and ethnic numbers into simple tables, and provides a unique focus on California. For instance, users can get demographics for the "six Southern California counties."
- The Los Angeles Times style and usage guide.
- O.J. Simpson criminal and civil case transcripts.
- Access to fee-based Internet resources such as Congressional Quarterly, Encyclopedia Britannica, FIS Online, Leadership Directories, and the Almanac of American Politics.

To help our staffers learn how to use these and other resources, the library offers classes and brown bag lunch sessions to anyone interested. Topics have included "Backgrounding an Individual," "Law and Legal resources on the Internet," and "The Literary Web: Quotes, Catalogs & Other Writing Sources." The sessions have proved popular, sometimes drawing an overflow crowd.

The More Things Change...

Now it's time for a reality check. Just because our library users have a well-stocked arsenal of online research tools at their disposal doesn't mean they don't need library help.

The fact is, despite all the advances, the number of end-users doing their own research is still limited by the same four issues faced 15 years ago: Time, money, technical capabilities, and searching skill.

Time: No matter how simple or easy online research becomes, there are some people who just don't have time for it.

At the Times library we receive countless calls for information that can be quickly found online: spellings, population figures, the party affiliation of politicians, the distance between two points, copies of stories from TimesOnline, dates of historic events.

In part, this is because some users are reluctant to spend time learning something that they doubt they'll need very often. But it also reflects a confidence that librarians can do the research faster and better.

Cost: Though online research is cheaper than ever before, it's not always free. Reporters searching the web often find links to articles, but can't view the stories without paying fees. They call the library to pull the article from Nexis, Dow Jones or Dialog.

In addition, since free Internet people-finding tools are fairly weak, many Times reporters call on the library to search for names in fee-based public records databases. Similarly, some online court records require a fee and are accessed only by librarians.

Technological limitations: For all the blessings that technology brings us, it seems to bring us an equal share of problems.

Who among us has an Internet connection that always works? Is there anyone whose browser has never frozen? Does your printer print perfectly every time? We all face technical problems, and Times staffers aren't immune.

Times reporters and editors call the library for help because they can't connect to a website, they can't get something to print out properly – or because they don't even have a printer. Sometimes Java doesn't work for them, or perhaps they need help opening a PDF or spreadsheet file.

Since the Times has reporters all over the world, some of them find themselves in situations with very limited resources. Reporters in Mazar-i-Sharif or Kandahar, Afghanistan, or even on the road in Missouri, often can't do their own online searching. If possible, we will fax or email what they need. Sometimes, there's no option but to read them information over the phone.

One unique feature offered by the Times library is the ability to print stories in "newspaper format." This is nicely formatted printout features the Los Angeles Times logo at the top, with the story presented in newspaper-like columns. It is very popular at contest time.

Search skills: We've put our end-users in position to help themselves.
But just because they can do some online research doesn't mean they can do *all* online research.

It's easy for librarians to forget that online research can be, well, *hard*. We've become so accustomed to the innumerable nuances of searching – the Boolean logic, field searching, relevancy rankings, truncation, automatic pluralization – that we may take for granted the skills involved.

In 1986, Emily Gallup Fayen wrote in American Libraries: "Although the goal of user self-sufficiency is laudable, the result is that patrons may think that using the library is supposed to be easy. This leads them to further devalue the services the librarian provides. Librarians may inadvertently reinforce this perception because the library and its workings become so second-nature to them after years of study and experience that they tend to forget what a complex organization a large library is. They have become so comfortable with the library's idiosyncrasies and procedures that they assume patrons can easily learn the system."

Fortunately, at the Times, our users seem to recognize their limitations. They turn to the library when a search is too complex, they're just not finding what they need, or they doubt the reliability of something they found on the Internet.

(Consider just one factor: the Tasini decision. This Supreme Court action has created such great holes in online archives that our end-users can't be sure of the thoroughness of their searches and must ask librarians for help. Said Tim Rozgonyi, assistant technology systems editor for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: "Tasini is the closest thing to a lifetime employment guarantee for news librarians that you will ever see.")

Perhaps most importantly, library users are seeking out librarians for help in navigating through the often-bewildering array of online research options now available. Times librarians are increasingly getting involved in the early stages of newsroom projects, assembling topic-related intranet pages, and serving as guides to the best and most authoritative online resources.

Conclusion

In the 19 years since I first saw that early Lexis/Nexis computer, online research has grown in ways that few could have imagined. What at one time seemed like a narrow specialty confined mostly to librarians has expanded to draw in a popular audience eager to find information without having to know arcane searching methods.

But rather than being displaced by this shift, librarians are finding themselves in important new roles. They are valued for their knowledge of constantly changing technology. They are needed for their ability to sift through a fast-growing information universe. And they are trusted for their skill in analyzing and assessing the quality of online sources.

So who needs librarians? Everyone.

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